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LETTER DATED 26 JANUARY 1993 FROM THE CHARGE D'AFFAIRES A.I. OF THE PERMANENT MISSION OF IRAQ TO THE UNITED NATIONS ADDRESSED TO THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

On instructions from my Government, I wish to transmit to you herewith an article entitled "Making the Desert Glow", published in the 21 January 1993 edition of The New York Times, which recounts how United States forces and their allies used depleted uranium shells during their aggression against Iraq.

I should be grateful if you would have this letter and its annex - the aforementioned article from The New York Times - circulated as a document of the Security Council.

(Signed) Adnan MALIK
Chargé d'affaires a.i.

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Making the Desert Glow

By Eric Hoskins

AMMAN, Jordan

The gulf war lives on, as this week's air strikes against Iraq have proved. But the conflict goes beyond Iraqi missile batteries in forbidden places. It extends, frighteningly, to radioactive artillery shells used by coalition forces two years ago. The spent rounds may be the cause of fatal illnesses, including cancer and mysterious new stomach ailments, showing up in Iraqi children. Because of sanctions and war, the death rate of children under 5 has tripled. In the first eight months of 1991 alone, 50,000 children died.

Known as depleted uranium penetrators, the shells were developed by the Pentagon in the late 1970's as anti-tank, armor-piercing projectiles. Depleted uranium, which makes up the shell's core, is a radioactive by-product of the enrichment process used to make atomic bombs and nuclear fuel rods. The material is extremely hard and abundant, and provided free to weapons manufacturers by the nuclear industry.

When fired, the core bursts into a searing flame that helps it pierce the armor of tanks and other military targets. Diesel vapors inside the tank are ignited, and the crew is burned alive.

In the six-week land war against Iraq, U.S. and allied coalition tanks, artillery and attack planes fired at least 10,000 of the 6-inch, 6- to 8-pound shells. A confidential report by the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority, written in April 1991 and leaked to The Independent newspaper of London in November of that year, estimates that at least 40 tons of depleted uranium was dispersed in Iraq and Kuwait during the war.

Among other things, the depleted uranium rounds forced the Pentagon to concede additional friendly-fire casualties when traces of radioactivity were found on destroyed coalition military vehicles. Iraqi forces did not have uranium penetrators.

While it's too early to prove a link, many health experts suspect that the postwar increase in childhood cancer and mysterious swollen abdomens is at least in part due to the radioactive shells. U.N. personnel and aid workers have seen children playing with empty shells, abandoned weapons and destroyed tanks. In Basra, a foreign doctor saw a child using depleted uranium shells as hand puppets.

The Pentagon insists that depleted uranium is "very, very mildly radioactive" and that the shells are not radioactive enough to be classified as a "radiological weapon." It has claimed that allied tank crews firing the rounds received little radiation, the equivalent of a chest X ray each day.

Most doctors and scientists agree that even mild radiation is dangerous and increases the risk of cancer. The health risk becomes much greater once the projectile has been fired.

Eric Hoskins, a doctor and public health specialist, was medical coordinator of the Harvard Study Team's surveys of health and welfare in postwar Iraq.

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U.S. uranium shells used in the gulf war may be killing Iraqi children.

After they have been fired, the broken shells release uranium particles. The airborne particles enter the body easily. The uranium then deposits itself in bones, organs and cells. Children are especially vulnerable because their cells divide rapidly as they grow. In pregnant women, absorbed uranium can cross the placenta into the bloodstream of the fetus.

In addition to its radioactive dangers, uranium is chemically toxic, like lead, and can damage the kidneys or lungs. Perhaps the fatal epidemic of swollen abdomens among Iraqi children is caused by kidney failure resulting from uranium poisoning. Whatever the effect of the depleted uranium shells, it is made worse by malnutrition and poor health conditions.

The British report called the presence of depleted uranium in Iraq and Kuwait a "significant problem," concluding that there is enough uranium there to cause "tens of thousands of potential deaths." Fortunately, there have been no reports of uranium-related illnesses in Kuwait. That may be because fewer uranium shells were used there — most of the heavy ground fighting took place in southern Iraq — and because the country was cleaned up after the war.

The danger posed by the uranium shells is widely recognized. In July, German authorities arrested Siegwart Gunther, director of the Albert Schweitzer Institute, when he arrived in Berlin carrying a spent round retrieved from Iraq. He was charged with illegally "releasing ionizing radiation."

The shell, its radioactivity confirmed by two laboratories, was sealed in a lead-lined box. Needless to say, there are not many lead-lined boxes in Iraq.

It's likely that the depleted uranium may have already contaminated soil and drinking water in Iraq. If this is the case, Iraqis could be exposed to the radioactive and toxic effects of uranium for generations to come.

Certainly such fears are not without foundation. In New Mexico, where uranium rounds are test-fired by the military, questions have been raised concerning ground water poisoning. In 1986, James Parker, then associate director of the Bureau of Land Management, told Congress that land used to test these weapons could be permanently contaminated.

Despite the risks associated with depleted uranium, there has been virtually no debate about its effects in postwar Iraq and Kuwait. The U.N. Environment Program, which has investigated ecological damage of the gulf war, has been remarkably silent. To date, no effort has been made to assess the extent of radioactive contamination due to depleted uranium rounds in Iraq or to locate and remove the shells. Similarly, although Congress has ordered the military to monitor the health of soldiers exposed to smoke from Kuwaiti oil fires, there has been no such directive concerning exposure to depleted uranium.

What should be done? Once current tensions in the gulf have subsided, qualified research groups, like the 1991 Harvard Study Team, should go to Iraq to analyze the soil and water for evidence of uranium contamination. Epidemiologists should explore the connection between the uranium shells and cancer. The U.N. must take a more active role in investigating the danger posed by the shells, and begin clean-up efforts of all radioactive shells remaining in Iraq and Kuwait.

It should also consider recommending that depleted uranium penetrators be banned in accordance with international treaties on chemical and radioactive weapons. □